

# Tips for Teachers

As Daedalus and Icarus would view it, the new Acropolis Museum in Athens is a giant glass box perched improbably by the ancient Theatre of Dionysus, out of character with the classical surroundings, and looking remarkably industrial. Should this father and son team choose to fly, say, over Bilbao, they would see another modern museum, and it, too, is a shocker, but what a beauty of a shocker it is: the Guggenheim teases the senses, inviting one in with organic writhing, with twists that confuse, delight, and exult. But not so this new Athenian home for the Acropolis marbles. Some have compared it to an airport booking hall. Others have been less kind.

Your editor saw it last week. He had been very much looking forward to it, and was even more than willing to predict that in some future European utopia, the British Museum's Elgins would one day return in a procession that would rival the ancient pan-Athenian. World peace would ensue, and Greeks would clasp Britons in bonds of brotherly love. Now, I'm not so sure, and have even decided that those Parthenon marbles should stay exactly where they are.

On innumerable school trips over the years, the Athenian acropolis has been the crowning point of the odyssey, the 2500 year old temple to the Virgin Goddess standing in ragged majesty above the clamoring city, the tiny, homely museum crowding in centuries of dusty statues, giving voice to pre-Periclean civic pride. The new museum certainly is spacious; I'll give it that. Mediterranean sun spills in gloriously, as do the crowds. There is a lovely rooftop cafe where you can enjoy fruit salad and hearty Greek coffee. There is a bookshop. But somehow, at least to my eyes, the statues look a bit lost in all that space, and the gypsum replicas of the "Elgins" are frankly ugly. Perhaps they are meant to be in order to remind us of the Greeks' insistence that the originals be returned. And before I was able to visit the new museum, I was all for it. Let the British Museum prepare identical resin replicas of the bas reliefs and the pedimental sculptures, and give the originals back. But now. No.

Before I go any further, I need to confess that I spent my formative years in Nashville, Tennessee, home to the world's only full-size replica of the Parthenon. It forms the core of Centennial Park in Music City, USA, houses a lovely art gallery, boasts an enormous statue of the Virgin Goddess based on ancient sources (finally allowed by Christian fundamentalists three decades ago; prior to this, it was deemed idolatrous in the Bible Belt!), and -- wonder of wonders -- fairly decent casts of the Elgins. I grew up on this, Greece in Nashville, classical perfection to give life to our neo-Classical southern heritage. So I grew up loving all things Greek. It was inbred in us at school and in our daily environment.

And loving all things Greek, I felt those 'Elgins' should be returned to their point of origin. Maybe it was the incessant droning of a Greek guide who killed my enthusiasm on the recent visit. Why is it that they still function like Victorian school marms? Were they to teach like that in one of our international middle schools, they'd be out on their ears within minutes. Granted, they know a lot: more than I do, in fact! But

why insist on sharing every last iota of that knowledge in one long lecture that permits no question, no breath, no pause for reflection on part of the viewer? But mostly it is because of that new building. It's modern without being innovative. It's sleek without being beautiful. And it charges you to go in!

The dusty old British Museum on the other hand, in neo-classical splendor, is free, it bathes the Parthenon marbles in softened natural light, and boasts a good educational programme. Yes, there is controversy over Lord Elgin's acquisition of these stones some 200 years ago from the Ottoman government of the day. But I still can't see how the statues would be 'improved' by returning them to this new glass box. People are free, of course, to make up their own minds. Should *all* museum artefacts be returned to their points of origin? Some people think so. This would, in effect, empty all of our cabinets of curiosity, and impede research, and middle school field trips!

I think the British Museum would be right to give casts of the Parthenon marbles. Today, they could be made so perfectly that no casual viewer would be able to tell ancient from modern. They might even return the lone Karyatid from the Erechtheon which is displayed poorly in the BM, and deserves more majesty, not that the new arrangement of Karyatids in the Acropolis Museum is all that accessible. Perhaps the BM might even return parts of the doorway of the 'Treasury of Atreus' from Mycenae. But not the Parthenon marbles.

This is one man's opinion. Admittedly, I live in England, though some 130 miles from the BM, so it isn't as if I stroll in to see the Marbles on a daily basis (though I used to when I lived in north London). Readers are invited to submit their own ideas about where the Parthenon marbles should be. I would like to think that perhaps I have stirred up a bit of ELMLE controversy, and some teachers may print T-shirts demanding the return of the Marbles NOW! Some may even wear them at the upcoming green conference in Budapest.

Go to Athens. It's a vibrant, culturally magnificent city. Pollution is still a problem, but you can always escape for a few days to Nafplio or Aegina, to Meteora or Delphi. And the sense of godly munificence lurks around every corner, except, for me, in the that new glass box at the foot of the acropolis. It's too large to have been made with neoclassical inference; it's just right to have been made with more exuberant creative flair. No, there I go again. You must go and see it for yourself, and make your own decisions. Not that we have any voice in whether the marbles should be returned or not. It's an engaging proposition, and the arguments will rage for many a year to come.

Add your thoughts. Write me, [alan\\_heath@asl.org](mailto:alan_heath@asl.org), to air your views, to set me straight, or to make new propositions. See you at the conference in Budapest in late January, yes? We can discuss all this over a bottle of Metaxa five star (oh, all right, seven star if you insist), and set the world to rights. How about 8.30 on Saturday evening in the whirlpool bath in the spa of the Corinthia?

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